

## SARTRE'S POLITICAL PRACTICE\*

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### I

Sartre's political actions, rather than his political thinking, are the subject of these notes: the way he has judged the history through which he has lived, how he chose sides, and why, the people he allied himself with, and those he allies himself with today. It is a limited topic, and an arbitrary one to the extent that a political dimension cannot be peeled away from the overall theoretical endeavour of the French philosopher. And not because every philosophy is at the same time an ideology—consciousness or false consciousness of society; but for the specific reason that Sartre's theoretical endeavour is a reflection upon how man takes his place in history and operates within it. Situation, project, freedom, alienation, violence—the **Sartrean** themes—are the conceptual material underlying his choices, which, in their turn, continually refer back to his material.

And yet, even this material proves really to be a product of political activity in a broad sense, rather than a pure theoretical construct on to which, as a subsequent stage, a practice is overlaid. Sartre's thought constitutes a reaction both to the ignorance, within French culture, of the Hegelian Left, and to the positivist temptations to which the working-class movement is subject: both of which he finds emasculating. Sartre is perfectly aware of this when he affirms that he wished to steer Marxism decisively in an "anti-deterministic" direction: when he says "Marxism", he means this culture, he means what Marx has become in the practice, even in the theoretical practice, of the Communist and non-Communist left, rather than a reconstruction and reappraisal of Marx's original itinerary, in which he has shown relatively little interest, perhaps less than he should have. In fact, it is not hard to measure against the texts Sartre's own "Marxism", or what he understood, accepted or rejected in **Marx**,<sup>1</sup> yet, even those who are convinced that without a return to Marx there can be no rediscovery of the thread of revolution in the West, cannot escape the essential sterility of using such a yardstick. Some of Sartre's theoretical battles against "Marxist" determinism certainly derive from a questionable reading of Marx. What of it? They lead to conclusions which

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cannot be defined as "Marxian". What of that? It is their *political* orientation that is the determining factor, the need to rediscover a theoretical dimension of liberty and commitment which Sartre feels, wrongly with regard to Marx, rightly with regard to "Marxism", that has been mutilated or denied. Even when the required political and philological re-appraisal gives to Marx what is Marx's, we still have to settle our accounts with the "Marxism" of the Second and Third International, if we are not simply to wipe them out of history as a chance occurrence. And it is with regard to these that Sartre endeavours to define his conceptual universe, his need to "complete" or "fill out" Marxism, or to modify it.

So it is the political purpose and historical context of his thought that, in the last analysis, provide the best key to its significance. And in this sense, to detach Sartre the political actor, the Sartre who chooses sides and takes up positions, from the rest of his work, is less arbitrary than at first appears. Firstly, because his political participation has a dimension and sphere of autonomy of its own, to which his theoretical elaborations from time to time correspond, uncompromisingly showing up their real theoretical consistency. Secondly, because the question of commitment, of taking one's stand, is objectively imposed by the fact of social conflict *hic et nunc*. Commitment is not determined one-sidedly within the conscience of the philosopher, but in relation to that conflict, within that conflict. Commitment is a project which brings us face to face with other projects; which inevitably either puts us to the test in actively combating the inertia of servility, or else is doomed to reflect and be subject to this inertia, "The problem"—Sartre told Camus in 1952 "is not to ask whether history makes sense or not, and whether we should deign to take part in it or not; we are in it up to our necks, one way or the other. The problem is to try to give it the meaning which seems to us to be most right, not refusing to contribute, however modestly, to any of the actions that require it of us. More than this: it is idle to debate whether there are values which transcend history: if there are, they are those which manifest themselves in what men do, in human actions."<sup>2</sup>

This is Sartre's dominant theme: being and thought are given *in praxis*. So much so, that Sartre would be the last to reject or invert the method chosen by Raymond Aron for the reconstruction of his itinerary, which is entirely and meticulously related to the coherence or contradictions of his philosophic system—namely, that the sole criterion, acceptable though reductive—for the evaluation of his overall activity is to gauge it *in its entirety* in terms of the political activity which it engendered.<sup>3</sup> In terms of whether or not he was able to work towards the negation of the inert which Sartre the man found himself up against; or, as he would say today, of whether or not he was able to work for-the revolution.

We will see shortly whether, in Sartre himself, this reduction is really accepted without residue: it is not so, and in fact in recent years his life

has undergone a dichotomy into one sphere of immediate commitment, his links with "les Maos", his friends of the "Cause du peuple" and now of "Libération", and that other sphere of his Flaubert, work which he has pursued in isolation, and by no means as an enquiry apart from politics, but as a politics apart, at a level which, as things are today, is not capable of verification either by events or by mass-consciousness; a politics outside politics, projected towards a tomorrow in which there is no telling even whether it would retain the meaning which Sartre assigns to it *today*.<sup>4</sup>

But this is a contradiction far less intrinsic to Sartre than to the historical conditions in which an intellectual such as he operates, and particularly in France. We shall return to this point. We wish only to stress that Sartre would be the last to reject the verification of history in terms of praxis—and not praxis in general, but precisely his own specific, day-to-day praxis. Indeed, this is what marks him out unmistakably from other left intellectuals, who have eased themselves either into a fellow-travelling role—which exempted them from any direct choice, passing this responsibility on to others—or into reducing their own political action merely to witness-bearing, if not to the avowal that a "true" intellectual is absolutely debarred from taking sides, since history is spurious, a disappointment of expectations. It is at this point that the great divide takes place between Sartre and Camus, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: the second by far the more painful. But also between Sartre and many communists, who consider themselves by definition committed, and morally in the clear, simply by being in the party.

The publication in France of Louis Althusser's *Réponse à John Lewis*<sup>5</sup> outlines the symmetrically opposite position, reducing the intellectual's political activity to the pure task of the defence or restoration of principles. Althusser is not satisfied with the alliance which the PCF is ready to contract with the intellectuals so long as they keep their minds off politics; but he consolidates a relationship which is no less evasive and fundamentally opportunist, precisely because he conceives politics in such a way as to exempt himself from a direct participation which might bring him into head-on collision with the leadership. This latest volume is the theoretical justification of such a stance. The debate with Lewis—which seems so aridly scholastic and pedantic in the opening pages, on the question of who makes history, mankind or the masses, and what we mean by "to make history"<sup>w</sup>—reveals its practical purpose if we understand that Althusser is "restoring" Marxism by reducing history to the mechanism of the class struggle as such, quite apart from the intervention of any acting subject. This is the "objectivity" which, taken to be the fundamental distinguishing feature of "true" Marxism, or, rather, of "Marxism-Leninism", exempts the subject from any contingent obligations to participate; class struggle is, like it or not, an engine already in motion, and one's margin of choice is not even marginal. The intellectual may

confine himself to reflecting upon it, that is to read it, and help others to read it, aright, keeping himself otherwise, if only by proxy, in the mainstream which reflects the objective mechanisms of the conflict. The party itself, in some sense, is outside responsibility, being willy-nilly bound through class to an "objective" antagonistic stance; this enables Althusser, who quite clearly cannot fit the Left's "Common Programme" into a "**Marxist-Leninist**" framework, to put it into parenthesis, as something incidental to the flow of the class struggle, which certainly cannot but manifest its truth. In this way, direct day-to-day commitment and participation not only appear unnecessary, or at least secondary to the foremost obligation of understanding the objective dialectic within society: it risks being a negative factor, by introducing a subjective—ergo an idealist, ergo a falsifying—deviation into the situation.

Althusser thus seals the gap between being and doing in favour of the former, as Sartre shifts the balance on to the latter: and it is no accident that it is not John Lewis—whom he considers harmless to France as well as to England—but the tiresome and unremitting Sartre who is the real target of Althusser's criticism: Sartre—the very opposite to a *maitre à penser* eager to dispense wisdom and careful not to get caught up in the aberrations of life as lived. No one as much as Sartre is in it—to use his own words—up to his neck, taking upon himself all the risks, including those which hurt the intellectual most: the negation of his own role, the sharing with the plainest militant of gestures which on the one hand can never identify him with the disinherited and on the other hand may cost him much.

In recent years, in fact, Sartre has not only continued to reject every enticement held out to him by the Establishment, whether universities or academics or the Nobel Prize. Not only has he launched appeals: he has gone out into the streets to hand out leaflets not of his own drafting (and which he might well have drafted differently), braving the fact that, being recognized, he conferred a special extraneous and sensational effect upon the hand-out. He has held forth, perched on a barrel outside one of the gates of the Renault Billancourt works, while the workers, primed by the CGT, slipped out by another exit, and throngs of journalists, news photographers, and television crews recorded the image of his isolation. He had himself smuggled into the Renault works in a covered goods vehicle with the intention of having himself thrown out so as to illustrate how far the people were from being masters of a "nationalized" industry whose gates are kept locked to them. He joined in a sit-in at the offices of a company, though he knew the action had been ill-planned and that it would be futile, because to draw back would have meant exposing the militants who had proposed it and the workers who might gain a certain advantage by his participation. He has attempted several times, and nearly always in vain, to get himself charged.

Such gestures are burdensome to carry out, particularly when the move-

ment is on the ebb, and it is not hard to see the extent to which they are ineffective, given the lack of comprehension of the masses for whom they are meant to speak, the sparseness of the avant-garde, and the errors to which their very weakness dooms them. Sartre must be granted, then, not only what Althusser, even while attacking him, grants him as Marx granted to Rousseau—namely, that he never bowed before might; but he must also be granted credit for having risked, by his political actions, not only the favour of the mighty, but his own image, his own following, his own safe role as an intellectual, throwing overboard the easiest solution: consistency at the pure level of ideas, where validation is always vague and defeat always open to doubt.

## II

Sartre's choice to go to the bitter end every time and pay the price comes from his conviction that an intellectual's debt to the disinherited is unredeemable. It is a conviction that runs even deeper: up to 1969 (that is, not even in the heat of "the events of May", but later)<sup>6</sup> he was not absolutely clear how far an intellectual is involved and has to deny himself, and why he does not succeed in denying himself absolutely—Sartre remaining always Sartre, with a past, a burden, objectively integrated into the culture market, reified by a society which can commercialize even his venom. But the nucleus of this conviction goes back a long time; it is a long-established sense of sin on which *Les mots* said the last word even before May 1968, and which constitutes the guiding thread of his enormous work on Flaubert. The intellectual's awareness derives not only from his privileged status and from the mechanisms and ideology of the culture market: but more so from the recurring temptation to apartness and self-sufficiency, to grind down reality into form, to reproduce oneself and one's good conscience. An intellectual—he said in his conversations with his Maoist friends—is a fellow who the moment he learns something from someone turns it into a book. That is, he transforms the world, or what he glimpses of it, into a product off which he lives more or less parasitically.

His disquiet has a distant source. Perhaps in his bad conscience over those **far-off** thirties, when, with Simone de Beauvoir—who retained that happy mood longer than he did—he lived his life of an intellectual as a strong and joyous affirmation of freedom, sufficient unto itself. True, *l'enfer c'est les autres*; true, the weight of the inert is terrible. But, in grasping its mechanism and writing about it, Sartre as an individual emancipated himself from it, claimed himself to be an exception, mapped out his project. All the more so in that, however ambiguously, he is accepted: "My fame is built on hatred", he would say one day; yes, but success and recognition are there. This gratification apart, the intellectual's illusion of freedom consists in his taking up a critical stance with regard to

the world from the outside; in a word, he takes up a position, but only as a judge, aware of the slimy current that carries the world along, but holding his head out of the water. As one reads Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs in *La force de l'âge* (which covers the period from 1929 to the end of the war, and is the most interesting part of her autobiography), one is struck by this secret exultation which vaults over every constriction, hardship, work problem, fatigue. There is also in her, a woman, the pleasure of having at last completely emancipated herself, after beginning as a *jeune fille rangée*. But Sartre also joined in the mood, in the unavowed certainty that after all it might be impossible to hold the intellectual in bondage, that he might be immune from the absolute alienating mechanisms to which others succumb.

Talking about it today, Sartre confirms his "individualism". Even Fascism and the Popular Front did not really rid him of this, for his participation remained a purely external matter. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "When the Matignon agreements were signed we were glad for the workers' sake". As Sartre said in 1972 to Pierre and Philippe Gavi: "I was absolutely in favour of the Popular Front, but it would never have crossed my mind to vote, so as to give my opinion the value of a decision. . . I remained an individualist, drawn to the masses who *made* the Popular Front, but not realizing that I was one of them and that I must stand by them." "Perhaps", he added, "this attitude may be redeemed thanks to a vague distrust of universal suffrage (the obscure notion that a vote could never concretely express a person's will; later I would realize that what bothered me about the vote was that it can only serve delegated democracy, that it is a trick)." But this was an explanation from hindsight. The truth is that up to 1939: "I remained inactive, doing nothing but writing, while in perfect sympathy with the Left. I lived through the whole period from 1918 to 1939 as through the dawn of a lasting peace. It took the war to open my eyes. There I was, seeing myself as a minute and gleaming atom, and then along came massive forces which took hold of me and flung me on to the battlefield without asking my opinion."

Simone de Beauvoir is even more explicit about this rude awakening which revealed to her the deceptiveness of the freedom she thought she had won. She experienced the war as a terrible imposition, while Sartre was made prisoner. But it was not the same sort of imprisonment. For contact with his fellows, in the trenches first and then in the prison camps, turned into a discovery of people quite different from the ones which up till then had been culturally mediated. Out of the common fate he gathered something which his own fate as an individual did not give him; and he gathered this out of a *practical* experience, the need to organize a common self-defence. *Les autres* became the material for acting together, the discovery of solidarity. From here, it was a short step to politics. From that moment, his awareness as an intellectual underwent a change; the pride would

remain, but gone for ever was that equivocal exhilaration that sprang from an "innocent" acceptance of culture.

Not only can man not be free individually, but, simply through having thought it possible to be so, and through having shaped his life accordingly, the intellectual becomes absolutely unequal, apart from other people, "unjust". It is a condition from which he cannot escape, an indelible privilege—failing a total choice like that of a Che Guevara or a Norman Bethune—but a condition of which, at least, he must of necessity be aware. There was a revealing remark in the 1952 debate with Camus. When the latter warned, "I've got tired of hearing all this from you," Sartre replied bluntly: "People like me and you, if we are tired, ought to take a rest, seeing that we're not short of money. The number of those who have reason to be more tired than we are is infinite, and to wave our tiredness in their faces is grotesque."<sup>7</sup>

But how to establish a relationship with this mass of the dispossessed, of the persecuted, of those who are broken by work and exploitation? When Sartre, disguised as a civilian, managed to escape from his prison camp and return to Paris he felt by then completely cured of the liberal individualist illusion: he was an "anti-hierarchical socialist". The definition is today's, but we can well believe that it was applicable to that time also. Socialism was a natural point of reference, once he had turned the corner; rather than being motivated by egalitarianism, his anti-hierarchical approach reflected his own particular emphasis on the autonomy of the subject. The egalitarianism that has accompanied the anti-authoritarian principle since 1968 is in fact a new acquisition (or a rediscovery through the Chinese cultural revolution, and through the ideological crisis of the student movement, and through certain working-class struggles, particularly in Italy), which does not become decisive even in the latest Sartre; what keeps him some way from it is probably his mistrust of the authoritarian element, and its repressiveness, which are innate to the most rigorously egalitarian impulses. For these do not follow axiomatically, or in a linear and harmonious pattern, but involve a long series of negations.

The fact remains that an "anti-hierarchical socialist", at the height of the war, already had to face the problem of whom he was to join. Sartre first attempted, together with a group of friends, to form a small independent body, "Socialisme et Liberté". But he quickly realized that any participation in the Resistance depended on those who provided its structure, mainly the Communist Party. So he tried to make contact with it; this did not work at first, the Communists having encouraged suspicion towards escaped P.O.W's. Anyway, distrust towards Sartre melted away, and when the PCF in 1943 set up the "mass" structures of the Resistance, he was admitted and then safely put away into the *Comité des Ecrivains*, for which he zealously drafted leaflets. He wrote for *Lettres Françaises*, and at the liberation of Paris he was actually assigned to the armed defence of

the *Comédie Française*, which no German ever dreamt of storming. Sartre never succeeded in making genuine contact with the *maquis* and the Resistance network. This first link, a slender one based purely on anti-fascist and anti-German objectives, snapped as soon as the war was over. Sartre was the author of *L'Être et le Niant*; the Communists, *Lettres Françaises* and *Action* no longer needed him, suspected in him an "ideological enemy", attacked him. From then on and right up to the sixties, his overtures to the PCF, his withdrawals, the heated debates, the transient alliances fell into a pattern that repeated itself with the shifting situation for over twenty years. We shall not trace the detailed history of this relationship. What matters is to understand its underlying reasons and its results.

Right from the beginning, the relationship with the Communists appeared obligatory. An "anti-hierarchical socialist" could not seriously consider French socialism, which had its finest hour in the Popular Front, but then seriously compromised itself. With a poor, and strongly right-inclined theoretical tradition and a structure based on patronage, tied to a break-away section of the working class, *Force Ouvrière*, the SFIO had no appeal for a radical intellectual. An area of *socialist ideas* took shape in France, as in Italy in the Centre-Left heyday, on the fringes of the party rather than within it. For the intellectuals who emerged from the Resistance seeking a new society, there was no possible alternative: the relation had to be with the Communists.

It was a complex relationship, with open clashes and periods of tight-lipped clam. On one side stood the PCF, stationary, to all intents and purposes, in its methods, its advances towards the non-communists more apparent than real. On the other side, groups of intellectuals who could neither feel at home in it nor do without it, and who groped for a basis for *dialogue*.<sup>8</sup> There was a brick wall into which people like Sartre—and he was, among French intellectuals, the one who took the relationship with the PCF most seriously—were bound to crash, and that was the impossibility for a Communist Party sharing with an intellectual not bound by its discipline the elaboration of its political thinking. It could concede little or much as long as its strategy was not called into question: little in the Zhdanov era, when the Central Committee claimed to dictate even how to go about printing or doing work in *biology*; a good deal when, with the XXth Party Congress, "socialist realism" was the only relic of the past that was completely sacrificed, and the writer was at last allowed to tend his own garden in any way he pleased.

But only as long as this garden did not breed the flower of political enquiry, the discussion of strategy. On this, the party remained adamant, all the more so towards weeds or flowers "of the left", principles which were at the same time radical and libertarian, which wafted a fragrance long expunged—Trotskyism, Luxemburgism, anarchism, anarcho-

syndicalism. These—and even the return of Lenin and Marx outside the prescribed formulae—were viruses which Communist parties could not class on the same level as other "cultures" or "ideas", because they were blood that flowed through their own history, an infection that could again become endemic and strain or rupture their internal unity. This is not the place to dwell on the heart-searching which ideological monolithism must bring upon Communist parties: no leadership is so obtuse as to be unaware of its limitations. But without it, the danger, significantly enough, is the temptation to establish unity without any sort of dialectic, particularly—heaven forbid!—in organization, whereupon you have the dreaded splinter-groups: and this even dissident Communists assert. In fact, behind all this there is a theoretical reason, and not just a rationalization: it is the conviction that, if Marxism is to be revolutionary, it cannot be reduced to a purely relativist methodology. One law underlies social development—the class struggle. Therefore there is one theory of society; one praxis deriving coherently from it—"the line"—and therefore one instrument for its realization, "the party". This chain of reasoning, apparently cast-iron, is also confirmed by practice: the Communists feel they are at war, facing the rest of the world even when they are not fighting, and, in war, unity becomes the prime condition for defence or attack.

These arguments are not so easy to undermine. If they were, we could not explain the endurance and solidity of the Communist parties. Even where they have been weakened or almost annihilated by their own errors, as in much of the world, no other more satisfactory form of organization, party, mode of class being, has arisen, or any as effective. This is the impassable reef on which every criticism of the Leninist party must founder; even broader and sharper reefs are there to gash open pure spontaneity, since the "group in fusion" cannot, by definition, sustain its momentum or extend *itself*.<sup>9</sup>

This is the structure facing the left-wing intellectual in France and Italy. For him to find a real relationship without denying himself or the party, the latter would have to be able to conceive of its line as being the class-struggle in the making, reacting upon a permanent theoretical tradition, in dialectic with it, and bringing into this dialectic the new needs, ideas, groups and individuals which the social conflict throws up, at *full* tension. In other words, the party would have to be able to shape its experience into a unity and at the same time keep in mind the provisional nature of this unifying process, the necessity of measuring it by praxis, of remembering its objective tendency, the moment it has been released from the movement that produced it, to crystallize into something extraneous to that movement. But when the interlocutor on the left—intellectual, group, or avant-garde—sets the Communist party *this* problem, he is heading for a break. It is the institution's decision-making machinery that

cannot be called into question. The experience of the Chinese Communist party, during and after the Cultural Revolution, has in this respect some very weighty lessons to teach us.

### III

That is what happened to Jean-Paul Sartre. For a long time his relationship with the PCF, difficult though it was, passed for a sincere acceptance of the party *for what it was*. The closest link Sartre had with the Communists before the war was his friendship with Paul Nizan, whom he considered not only as the typical militant, but as "the official party spokesman". When Nizan abruptly left the party at the time of the Soviet-German pact, Sartre and his friends saw a confirmation of what they already knew, the priority of *Realpolitik* for the USSR over great principles, and the impossibility that the French Communist party should act otherwise. Italy's discovery of the USSR and of communism during her Resistance was quite different. In Italy from 1926 to 1943 Fascism had shut off all possibility of political class expression; the Communist party had been driven underground and its leaders imprisoned or exiled. Only the *émigrés* experienced the drama of the Soviet leadership and of the International after Lenin's death. This silence was broken with the war, the Resistance, the swift growth of a Communist and Socialist membership ~~that~~ knew nothing of the past or relegated it to the scrap-heap of memory: the Communists were the splendid people of the Resistance, the USSR was Stalingrad, Italy's renewal lay that way.

The French left could not be so innocent. In France, all was common knowledge: the breach within the Soviet leadership, Trotsky's criticisms, the drying up and near annihilation of the party in the late twenties, its isolation in the "class against class" phase, then its resurrection in the Popular Front (when Communist membership multiplied tenfold in one year), and at the same time the Moscow trials and the VIIth Party Congress—and all this led to splits and shifts on the left. Therefore, to envisage a relationship with the PCF, and thus with the USSR, after the war, meant accepting a political force already a long way from that revolutionary forthrightness which the "Red Resistance" had looked forward to in Italy, and a Soviet Union which could not be reduced to the heroic image of Stalingrad. It meant, in other words, recognizing the PCF's and the USSR's antagonism within a much more complex perspective, quite free from grand illusions.

This lucidity seems to typify Sartre's attitude, even in his oscillations, right from after the war and ever more clearly as the Cold War developed.<sup>10</sup> Even in the group connected with *Les Temps Modernes*, which he began to publish in the autumn of 1945 along with Merleau-Ponty, Aron, Pouillon, Leiris, Paulhan, Ollivier and Beauvoir, this was his emphasis, and

was to lead to the break with Merleau-Ponty. *Les Temps Modernes*, in fact, immediately showed a double thrust which involved on the one hand a **left-wing critique of the "Resistance betrayed"**, of the PCF's **parliamentarianism**, and of its legalism; on the other hand, there appeared an **anti-doctrinaire critique** which, though also present in the first, soon parted company with it in a swerve to the right. The two poles were symbolized respectively by Merleau-Ponty and Aron. Sartre did not go along with them. Not only did he clearly not go along with Aron, whose direction was recognizably "social democratic"; neither did he go along with **Merleau-Ponty**, to whom he was much closer, for, when he could not detect any identity between the spurious concreteness of facts and the pure abstraction of principles, he preferred the former to the latter. For a very short time, in fact, he pursued the illusion of a third position capable of saving both facts and principles. In the spring of **1948**, David Rousset, Georges **Altman**, **Gérard Rosenthal** and Jean Rous formed a grouping that wished to break away from the PCF on the basis of a critique along Trotskyist lines, and at the same time make contact with other forces: Sartre at first joined them—despite **Beauvoir's** negative expectations—then had to withdraw, when he found by **1949** that the group was already on the side of the United States. And from this he gained the conviction that when a confrontation, like that of the Cold War, was afoot, it was pure illusion to invent a third trench. One was always on one side or the other, and one had to choose.

So he would ever more rigorously choose the side of the USSR and the PCF, despite their raging attacks on him, which slid off him like a disagreeable but unavoidable attribute of Communist parties, whose vulgarity was so blatant—take the attacks of a Kanapa, echoing the Zhdanovite repertoire of the same period; or the epithet "typewriter hyena" which Fadeyev pinned on him, together with other such pleasantries—that it could not be the yardstick by which to judge them. All the more so as the Right made the most of it: see the sort of people these Communists are! Sartre had an acute sense of this "political usage" and soon tired of splitting hairs between the anti-communism of the Right and the anti-communism of the Left. When Kravchenko's book appeared, and Claude Lefort of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* approved of it "from the left", while *Le Figaro* and *L'Aurore* sang its praises from the right, Sartre had no doubt about the political meaning of the operation and came out against Kravchenko and all who made use of him.

So took shape what Merleau-Ponty called Sartre's "ultra-Bolshevism", which was the need to give a theoretical foundation to his stance. Talking over his ideological path recently with his Maoist friends, Sartre summarized it like this:

**When the RDR was wound up, I thought of what I should do if there was a war between the United States and the USSR. The Communist party seemed to**

me to represent the proletariat, and it seemed to me impossible not to be on the side of the proletariat. Besides, the RDR story had taught me a lesson: any micro-organism that deceives itself that it can mediate, splits up sooner or later. With the threat of war that seemed to loom around 1950-52, there was only one choice: for the United States, or for the USSR. I chose the USSR. What decided me was the international situation, but also the existence of a Communist party which I thought stood for the needs of the proletariat. Those were the days of Ridgeway's visit to Paris, the violent demonstration it sparked off, and the arrest of Duclos. The government's anti-communism was obvious. I was so indignant that I wrote three articles entitled 'The Communists and Peace' for *Les Temps Modernes*, in which I declared myself a fellow-traveller of the PCF. Thinking it over now, I think what drove me to write them was loathing for bourgeois behaviour rather than any attraction to the PCF. Anyway, I made the leap.

In talking to the "Maos", Sartre did not dwell on the theoretical work which this choice of necessity occasioned nor on the long argument with Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lefort which ensued. Yet it was a crucial stage: from 'The Communists and Peace' to *Stalin's Ghost*, Sartre's political thought took on its greatest intensity and laid the basis, which was neither contingent nor, as he called it, "limited to a few specific points", of his relationship with the Communists. Paradoxically, this also throws light on the abnegation of this relationship in later years.

The structure of the three articles was no less important than their content—was in fact the key to it. They started by assuming the precise historical significance of an event: Ridgeway's arrival, the public demonstrations, the French Communist party opposition to the bourgeoisie, which, the moment the Paris proletariat hesitated to follow its lead, claimed to see in this its liberation, a "regained autonomy" from the policy of the USSR. The unctuousness of the compliments showered from right and left upon the passive French workers sickened Sartre: the first piece was an indictment of the "rats visqueux", the sewer-rats who crawled out after their post-war panic to slobber over the corpse of the Paris proletariat: they rejoiced—he wrote—because they think it's finally dead. For how could one distinguish the defeat of the PCF from that of the working class: the threat to the USSR, from the workers' cause? Like it or not, this was the concrete contradiction which marked the battlefield in the class war.

Sartre was thus forced into a first generalization: that of demonstrating the peaceful character of the Soviet Union, and therefore the necessity for working people to defend it, under pain of being duped by imperialism into a war of destruction which would spell the elimination of every prospect of social redemption for the future. Then, under attack from Claude Lefort, he was driven into a second and broader generalization, that is, into the refusal to champion the proletariat as such: the proletariat that is, reduced solely to its role in the relations of production, shorn of its political and historical particulars, outside its "situation" (*prolétariat-*

*gélatine*); reduced to such an abstraction that its every political act, inseparable as it is from its concrete historical subject, became secondary. And this led to a third generalization, the most categorical of them all, the one which marked Sartre's closest approach to Leninism: class does not exist as such, but only in so far as it is political consciousness and action; consciousness and praxis constitute class in so far as it emerges from indeterminate passivity and becomes a "party". Once the identity has been established of organized thought, praxis and "party", whether this party makes mistakes or not, whether it is more or less faithful to its principles, whether its hands are clean or dirty—all this is secondary to the factual observation that it is the only form in which class expresses itself, that is, exists, Whoever turns his back on it, turns his back on the proletariat, even if he claims to be defending its integrity; he is chasing a phantom or, worse, defending his own easy conscience in staying snugly ~~put~~, with his principles to keep him warm, in his cosy university nook.

Sartre's three articles were an argument which developed under the fire of controversy: but Merleau-Ponty was right, they were all cemented with the same matter: factualness, the force of what is against what "should be".<sup>11</sup> What is, is the non-identity of the USSR and of the PCF with imperialism and the bourgeoisie. Merleau-Ponty protested for all ~~he~~ was worth that this meant defining the USSR and the PCF by negation alone, rather than as the positive countervailing force of a new history and a new society; Sartre replied that, spurious though they are in terms of Marx's ideas and perspectives, they remain antagonists to the bourgeois system. While the United States and the French government represented the dominant class in all its horror, the PCF and the USSR did not represent socialism in all its splendour: well, so what? They were the only actual adversary of the bourgeoisie, the only one it feared, the only divide for French society: *this* was the front where we have to take up our positions, not fronts which are more in line with our principles but remain utterly illusory, for we are up to our necks in this history, and in no other.

Sartre made it clear that to take this part was not to renounce all one's reservations. And he proposed, in all three articles, also to pick out the deficiencies of the Communist side. This, however, he never did. First, he was obliged—unlike the Communists, who did not feel called upon to do so—to provide the theoretical basis of the actual position which he defended. Now, as regards the USSR, things seemed to coincide in the objective opposition to the United States marked out in the Cold War, and in the objective peaceful character—because needful of peace—of the Soviet Union in those years. Nor was Sartre driven to much further argument, for no one could deny this without getting caught in the American net; no one, not even the Trotskyists, affirmed the one and only thing that would reduce the international role of the USSR to a contingent and therefore a precarious position—namely, that it was a great power not

unlike all the others. Merleau-Ponty conceded the essential point: "One thing is easily agreed, that is, that power in the USSR does not belong to the bourgeoisie; that Stalin's crucial choice was not to return to capitalism." It was no good his protesting that Sartre did not examine the *specific* nature of this society, which was *different* but perhaps not *revolutionary*; the consequences of the "ebb" after the October Revolution, of the necessity or otherwise of the options Stalin chose; the more or less irreparable damage they would cause. For, once the objective conflict between the USA and the USSR, between French capitalism and the PCF, had been admitted, Sartre required no more: he did not need to take an oath on their purity to take their side. And as long as the USSR stood up to the American empire, his choice, like that of most left-wing intellectuals, would not be in doubt.<sup>12</sup> So much so that, some years later, when he tackled the themes, in *Stalin's Ghost*, which Merleau-Ponty reproved him for having ignored in 1952, namely a definition of the nature of Soviet society, he retraced the same path as in 1952, only in more paradoxical fashion. In 1952 in fact Sartre discovered the party's reasons because he undertook its passionate defence; in 1956-1957, he discovered those of the USSR by undertaking a *passionate* critique. His historically factual approach, his fascination for historical reality, was once again what would lead him to construct what still remains today, along with Deutscher's work, with which it has much in common, the most convincing explanation of the Stalin era.

But this was not the point at issue in 1952. Sartre was far less interested in the hopes and disappointments of the European left with regard to Soviet society than in the meaning which the critiques of the Soviet Union assumed within the class struggle in France. He tackled the question of the nature of the USSR when, in 1956, the crisis within the Soviet camp erupted, and real historical action, not ideas, were at stake. In 1952, the existence of the French proletariat was at stake: the PCF risked being banned, the masses did not spring to its defence; some people expressed doubts, in the name of Marx, as to whether it should be defended. To prove them wrong, it was not enough for Sartre, as it was for the USSR, to resort to the force of fact: the PCF had not pursued revolutionary objectives, it had committed more than a few errors, it could be defined more by the persecutions it endured than by the battles it was fighting. Nevertheless—contrary to what he was to say in 1972 in his conversation with his Maoist friends—Sartre in 1952 had no doubt that the PCF was the only representative of the class, even if it was forced into purely defensive tactics: this was imposed on it by the double encirclement of international tension and an oppressive bourgeoisie, incapable of expansion and therefore lacking the economic margins which would allow it any relationship with the exploited class other than one of oppression, and of a permanent effort to liquidate it politically. This was the scene he set for the class struggle in

France in the early fifties. This was the historical validity that situated and defined both the French working class, which was latent, oppressed, silent, but not integrated, and its party.

In any case, he objected to Claude Lefort, what other criterion could define and judge the proletariat? The starting definition, whereby the proletariat existed in so far as capital exists, and vice versa, could not, on the analytical level, take us beyond pure tautology, and, on the political level, continually ran the risk of underestimating the self-consciousness which the proletariat needed, here and now, in order to be capable of political struggle. By dint of going "further to the left" than the PCF, one lapsed into a purely mechanical and deterministic understanding, which was unhistorical and, in the final analysis, apolitical: the proletariat would only need to exist, or rather to go on existing, in order to generate its antagonistic power day by day and, in the long term, the inevitable contradictions between the mode of production and the forces of production upon which the system was destined to founder. So the best way of burying capitalism, Sartre ironically concluded, would be to work hard in the capitalist's factory. But this was the path of the Second International, which showed through the left-wing critique of the "anti-Stalinists" of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Being exploited is not enough to turn the proletariat, which produces capital and is produced by it, into a political subject or agent: it must achieve consciousness of its exploitation, it must organize, it must act. The class must become a party.

Reading over the debate with Lefort twenty years later, it is curious to see Sartre rebuking Lefort for just about the same thesis currently sustained by Althusser: that is, the belief that history needs no acting subject, the mechanism of class struggle being of itself a generator of its fundamental transformations. In reality, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, Lefort cannot be reduced to this position: Sartre's polemical ardour deforms the argument. All the more so in that, if Lefort evades defining the point on which Sartre presses him (*how* class becomes class-consciousness, and thus exists as an antagonistic class? *how*, through what forms, it determines its activity? and thus *what* actual class, situation by situation, is expressing its consciousness? by *what* organization, programme, political line of action?), Sartre, in stressing the aspect of subjectivity and consciousness continually leaves aside the objective material foundation without which class would have no substance at all, other than accidental: that is, the relations of production. Which is no less "material", in a Marxian sense, for being, as Sartre repeats, a "relationship between people". Sartre, in fact, in fear of falling into the pitfalls of determinism, reads and quotes Marx as if *Capital* were an accessory to his main work: that is, in terms of a historicism enriched with economic specificity; not at all in terms of seeing economics, as well as history, as a system of inter-relationships in which subjectivity is continually determined by an objective process, the law of the formation,

accumulation, and reproduction of capital. Marx's destiny seems to be that of always being read by halves, either in objective and deterministic terms which lend themselves to interpretations along evolutionist and Second International lines (the emphasis which Sartre attributes to Engels), or in subjective and historicist terms, which thus incline towards the approach of Lenin and the Third International. Sartre's "ultra-Bolshevism" stems from having, like the Communists, accepted this second reading: they too prefer to relegate Capital to the attic. But as soon as one shifts the emphasis on to the acting subject, that is on to the pure praxis of politics, the relationship between class and party becomes both extremely intimate and arbitrary, to the extent that it can be verified only by and through itself. Class being only its own organized consciousness, this organized consciousness derives legitimacy from itself: and it can be judged revolutionary or opportunistic by criteria which are themselves purely political, extraneous to the direct and concrete specificity of class. In escaping from its pure objectivity as a passive social datum, it runs the risk at every moment of losing the material basis for its activity: either it gets stuck in the factory, or forgets about it.

This is how Sartre really met the Communists, even if they didn't meet him, in the early fifties, and by no means on "limited and specific points" but on the key point: the primacy of the party's political leadership. And this led him to strengthen these links in a series of joint initiatives, from the Henri Martin affair to numerous campaigns, national and international. And it led him to remain for a long time on the side of the Soviet Union, with which he never made a formal break. Even 1956 does not break this link: in fact, if Sartre's first reaction is to protest (and, if we are not mistaken, the definition which so enraged the PCF, "from a party of firing-squad victims to a party of firing squads", is Sartre's), nevertheless, as soon as the immediate controversy dies down and a more searching enquiry gets under way, Sartre's attempt to do what the Communists do not do, that is, to reconstruct the how and the wherefore of the Stalinist distortions, is in the end, as we have already had occasion to mention, their most serious explanation.

In fact, what happens to Sartre, as to Deutscher, is that, in complete critical freedom, without any constraints of party discipline, without any axe to grind, without any preconception or apologetic or justificatory intention, he discovers the *reasons* for Stalinism. Where? In the extraordinarily backward and impoverished condition of Russian society. "We know how great a price our countries paid for primitive accumulation, we have not forgotten the immense wastage of human lives, forced labour, misery, rebellions, repression. The industrialization of the USSR was not bought so dear; yet what a terrible effort it required, how much sweat, how much blood: a race against time, in an underdeveloped country, composed almost entirely of peasants, a country encircled which had to grow despite

economic blockade and the constant threat of armed aggression. No one can ever say how far this fortress under siege could afford to reduce suffering and fatigue without running the risk of being wiped out."<sup>13</sup> This is the setting which, almost of necessity, produces the contradictions: between the long-term objectives of building socialism and the short-term interests of the working class; between "spontaneous negative reactions on the part of the masses against the needs of the economy as a whole" (even though the worker "knows that his efforts, thanks to the socialization of the means of production, will benefit the whole working class, and, through that class, the whole nation"); between leaders and masses, those who govern and those whom they govern; and then, towards the end of the twenties, the conflict with the mass of peasants, which "from **1930** forced the Soviet leaders to exercise in the name of the proletariat an iron dictatorship over the hostile peasantry. . ." Stalinism arises from the sequence of *inevitable* conflicts and from outside pressures ("socialism in one country, or Stalinism, is not a deviation from socialism; it is a long way round, imposed by circumstances"). This "bloody monster which lacerates itself, are we to call it socialism? He replies frankly: yes." Indeed, it is *the only* socialism in its primitive phase, the only one possible outside the empyrean of Platonic ideas.

The real errors, Sartre maintained, came later. When the USSR having overcome the original conditions and altered the balance of forces, demanded that its own model be imposed on the people's democracies which, unlike the infant Soviet society after October, *could do without it*. This is what brought about the Hungarian tragedy, the Soviet bloc's turning in upon itself, its pessimism, its relapses into terrorism, the outdated reflexes surviving from the past years of encirclement and Cold War. Errors, because unnecessary, are all the more serious in being remediable. Stalin was now but a ghost. With the change from the cruelly constricting reality of the twenties and thirties, the ghost could be exorcised today. This exorcism is the profound truth of Soviet society today.

The PCF reached the same conclusions as Sartre fifteen years later, the Italian Communist party somewhat earlier: which did not prevent them from taking him savagely to task in 1956. The fact is that the ten-year lag gives a quite different meaning to the historicist, yet critical, conclusions of *Stalin's Ghost*: it deprives it of all the explosive force which Sartre injected into it at the time, banking on a positive liberation of forces, and, by this means, on the continuity of history, mother of contradictions. It is by counting on history that Sartre then committed a double error of evaluation: on the inevitability of the past, and on the potential accumulated for the future. No other essay of Sartre's betrays the drawbacks of his passionate attachment to factual history as does *Stalin's Ghost*, the fascination which history as it has been lived through exerts on him, for in no other work, paradoxically enough, are historical data used,

occasionally, with such casualness, received rather than weighed up. Perhaps in 1957 a different evaluation of the stages ~~necessary~~ for "the building of socialism" in the USSR was neither available nor possible; what is certain is that when it became so, via the experience of the Cultural Revolution in China, Sartre never came back to the subject. His position alongside the Communists carried him up to the XXth Congress of the CPSU and—though it might not seem so today—with great power of persuasion.<sup>14</sup>

It is understandable. It was a terrible, but grandiose, history. Above all, he believed it was a history in the process of giving birth to new possibilities, and not only for the USSR. That unity of the left for which he had never stopped working, now seemed possible on the basis of a critical reassessment, long overdue, which promised to be fruitful. It is no accident that the essay on the Hungarian tragedy closed with a strong appeal for a Popular Front in France, "Only a Popular Front can save our country; that alone can cure our colonialism, wrest our economy from its Malthusian pattern, give it new thrust, organize mass production under workers' control so as to raise the standard of living; cast the foundations for a social democracy, recover our national sovereignty, smash the Atlantic alliance, place the power of France at the service of peace. . ." The critique, in short, was meant to unfetter the PCF from its past, thaw it out. The explosive charge of the XXth Congress and of the Hungarian revolution was to be used to get history back on the rails which fifty years of Communist organization, with their errors, bloodshed, guilt, had prepared for it and which Communists still could not see. Never had Sartre's criticism of the Communists and the USSR been so sharp, and never so firmly based on the recognition of the objective greatness of their achievement, which was far more solid than they themselves, in their obtuse smugness, were able to allow to themselves.

#### IV

How long did Sartre stay a "fellow-traveller"? Perhaps for a decade. But others, and perhaps not even he, cannot easily determine from his writings the stages of his withdrawal from the Communist party and the USSR, as one could the stages of his coming towards them. A series of factors were at work, of course. At home, the position adopted by the French Communists on the Algerian war, when Sartre—with the Manifesto of the 121—again forced the issue and detached himself with great polemical force from the PCF. Internationally, the negative results of the XXth Congress: the gradual collapse of hope in that new start which Sartre, like Deutscher, thought he had glimpsed in the "objective" conditions created by Stalin's death and by the problems of the development of Soviet society which he had bequeathed. Talking about himself today,

Sartre says that the break took place as he gradually came to realize that the PCF had renounced its antagonistic role and the use of violence, and that the USSR, with peaceful co-existence, had given up its opposition to the American empire. But these are rather unfounded arguments, more like a reconstruction from hindsight than the actual stages of what was to turn into his new picture of things. The Sartre of the 1950s was perfectly aware of the actual spirit of the PCF, and had reflected and written a good deal about it. Equally, it is not "peaceful co-existence" in itself that disturbed him. Even the Sino-Soviet split did not fully engage his attention.

Whoever re-reads his work or gathers first-hand evidence will see that the **key** to the sixties is the crisis in his relationship with the Communists. But it was not brought out in the open. It was no accident that it coincided with a change of direction in his work. He put aside the Critique de la Raison *Dialectique*, his most ambitious synthesis of political theory, and took up the enormous labour of his analytical study of Flaubert, in many ways further removed from political activity, a work of reflection which involved himself as well, as does *Les Mots*. What is certain is that, though he went on actively intervening and declaring himself—on Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, for the Russell Tribunal, and then on the Middle East—his contact with politics was less direct, less aggressive, and, above all, less ambitious. Was it from the waning of hopes raised by the XXth Congress (not in terms of *détente* but of reviving the workers' movement—the great gamble which informs *Stalin's Ghost*) that Sartre's relative disengagement from political action derived? I think so, though he does not say so. It corresponded, as a slow reaction, to the slow process which the USSR and the Communist parties went through up to 1968: a murky internal crisis, never too acute, a shift of stance without any clear-cut or decisive moments, in short, the triumph of Brezhnevism.

The fact is, that with the political changes internationally, and those in France, when Gaullism played its hand, together with the country's economic change, the roles of the protagonists who featured in the analysis on which Sartre was building throughout the fifties began to change. De Gaulle made peace in Algeria, De Gaulle went in for economic growth, De Gaulle broke with the Atlantic Alliance; De Gaulle, in other words, achieved all the great objectives which Sartre in January 1957 had thought that only a Popular Front could realize. Sartre did not attempt an overall reappraisal. *Les Temps Modernes* kept its pages open to political enquiry (particularly through Andre Gorz's participation) and to partial direct intervention on single issues. But, if we are not mistaken, Sartre never returned to the great questions of national and international strategy on the scale of the fifties, because that analysis was addressed to an interlocutor, a political agent, which he found less and less convincing. So much so, that when, one year before the outburst of the May events, the

prospect of a Popular Front re-emerged and the unity of the left for which he had fought so hard in the past finally took place, Sartre declared his vote (for the Communists instead of the boycott), but the business had lost all the interest and the real content which he thought it still had in the late fifties. Many political categories had expired in the course of the decade. The quietness of the process had ground down far more than a few short-term hypotheses. Sartre kept quiet, or maybe his true political writings over these years were his preface to Nizan's *Aden-Arabie* and certain articles or interviews about the "angry young men", in whom he perceived a latent, but authentic, political subject, free from the categories which had been absorbed either by the system or by the left. For the rest, he no longer knew whom to talk to, on behalf of Vietnam or the Third World, or the great causes of the poor and oppressed. Europe was for the time being put aside. The May eruption was to find him unprepared and out of things, like everybody else.

Naturally, he was to see the May events as proof of the rightness of his previous silence. This was the interpretation which freed him from his disquiet. It enabled him to revise—in fact, to condemn—past history. But above all it led him back into active politics. And once again he committed himself to the full; although his return bore a different mark from that of the past. He was both more and less committed than he was in his relationship with the Communists during the fifties. More so in the sense of his discovering day-by-day militancy, as well as in his humility, his "new way of acting politically", in his total erasure of his bad conscience as an intellectual "apart". Less so in the sense that this new militancy, though its moral and practical demands are great, largely absolved him from historical and strategic analysis. The very youth of the movement, the decision to break with the ways of the past, seem to exempt him from this. This is the Sartre of "La Cause du Peuple", of "Liberation", of the talks with Pierre and Philippe Gavi, of the preface to Manceaux's *Les Maos en France*, of those "scandalous" gestures of protest against the power of the Establishment.

Is there just one Sartre? Not any longer. Two guidelines, in our view, run parallel, never meeting, in Sartre's activity over the last five years. On the one hand, there is the "new style" travelling companion, who has chosen to be a militant alongside the left-wing group in which he can most easily, or with least difficulty, recognize himself: the Maoists of the "Cause du Peuple" (not the Marxist-Leninist party: "Maos" to the extent that they link up ideally with the Chinese revolution and Cultural Revolution, but without being subservient). On the other hand, there is the political intellectual who cannot help seeing that, on account of the numerical weakness of the avant-garde to which he belongs and the bitter proof of its limited following and influence, he is being displaced into a position like that for which he had once criticized the anti-Stalinist left, that is, of being

relatively ineffectual and cut off from the battlefield on which is articulated the real life of the masses, however confused and sluggish, their actual consciousness—in a word, the "is" rather than the "should be" of class struggle in France.

So that his need for totality, his need to master and mould into one pattern, one project, the whole of actuality, which has always fascinated him, can no longer be exercised on its natural ground of *politics*. It has to be transferred on to the ground of long-term reflection, on to Flaubert, on to the "non-militant" part of his work, which is not intended for political "consumption" in the present. This produces such a sharp dichotomy as to make a unity of living impossible, the unconcealed torment of a man who is denied any overall congruence between his thoughts and his activity. Several times, in talking to his Maoist friends, he translates this dichotomy into the contradictions brought on by age or by his relative physical decline: "How can I appeal to the Parisians to demonstrate, when I can't even follow a march all the way on foot?" But in our view this is the unconscious making of a duality that runs deeper: the difference of age is a difference of attitudes that have grown with one, it means Sartre's inability to be a "Mao" and his inability to deny that one and only germ of truth which he sees that the young Maoists possess, brothers, as it were, of those **young** people "of not more than twenty years of age" in whom, ever since 1960,<sup>15</sup> he had seen "the only real people of the left".

1968 and the new militancy of youth seemed to offer him the simplest explanation for failure of the Communist movement, and one which best satisfied an old need of his, the old endeavour to identify totally both politics and morality, strategy and gesture, overall project and individual choice, affirmation and violence. His error in the past was that of losing his way in the "historicity" of the movement and in all its detours. The revolution is saved only in recovering its identity with life. This is a forthright operation of Sartre's, but there is a price to be paid for it: the deletion, the relegation into negativity, of all the spurious and living ebb and flow of history which he had once upheld as the only authentic dimension of reality, in opposition to the abstract purism of the Camus, the Merleau-Pontys, the Leforts; and, even more seriously, the contradiction between the **affirmation** of a kind of politics as total liberation of the creativity of the masses from the deceptive snares of mediated forms and delegated powers, and the impossibility of bringing to life the masses, or even of getting through to them, this need, which ought to be their most immediate and discernible one. Almost as though the more one tried to go straight to the heart of their experience, the less chance one had of getting through to them.

Is this then a reversal of the positions he held in the fifties? If one reads Sartre's current statements about the Communist parties, certainly it is. Factuality, which he then accepted to the point of allowing no **measure-**

ment of it against what "should be", is now rejected in the name of a "should have been". In his conversation with Pierre and Philippe Gavi he indicts the PCF, without appeal, of not having wanted to make the revolution, whereas its duty lay in attempting it regardless of the balance of forces, that being the only way of educating the masses. Moreover, the International in its entirety is seen as an instrument devised for no other purpose than that of preventing and smothering revolutions. He completely wipes off the record the consciousness and organization, however incomplete it may be, and the shift of the historical panorama, which have been brought about by half a century of communism, as if his slowly maturing judgement during the sixties on the Communists and the USSR, the disillusionment he had endured, has washed over their entire history, and is now seen as an unbroken continuum without any major change of direction. This leaves no justification for his experience as a fellow-traveller, except that "I thought at the time that the PCF represented the proletariat". It would not be hard to object to Sartre today: "Well, then, who did represent it? Or wasn't there anyone?"—the very arguments he turned at that time against his anti-Stalinist friends. Actually, his current indictment sounds like a conscious simplification, almost like a cut-and-dried lesson in anti-revisionism. The Sartre of 1973 can hope that someone, a new political and human generation, can realize an unsterile identification of politics and morality, but he cannot have forgotten that the identification of history and morality is impossible, if not laughable.

It is, to our mind, a deliberate *reduction* of politics that Sartre now deems necessary. This is made possible by two elements of profound continuity in his thinking, the same two which we identified as determining his choice in the fifties. The first is still the primacy of fact: if Sartre feels he is being consistent in calling today for that unity of means and ends which he condemned as a moralistic qualm in his friends in 1952, his reason is that since 1968 it is possible to conceive of *another* concrete political expression of the proletariat, apart from the Communist parties. While in 1952 every option for what "should be" as opposed to reality eventually teetered dangerously rightwards, today not only do the Communist parties appear to have given up any revolutionary stance, but what "should be" is already coming to the surface in the waves of spontaneity within the movement and is crystallizing in the memories of the small groups. Confined to minority groups, it is nevertheless authentic, and capable of producing not reflection only, but action.

Enough to strike Sartre as the *present battlefield of the class struggle*? Certainly, he cannot but see that if this is the battlefield, the class comes to resemble a huge iceberg hanging deep into the sea of integration and showing only isolated peaks above the surface: so that, paradoxically, after the liberating upheaval of May 1968, his evaluation of the forces at work appears pessimistic as never before, his hopes of revolution have been

driven back further and further. Sartre never attempts to probe the submerged part of the iceberg (that is the politically inert mass of people, half-programmed, half-integrated into the system, into reformism, but without whom no political perspective can be drawn up) by reflecting on it with the same totalizing force as in the essays of the fifties, no longer addressing himself to the Communists, but, so to speak, to the part of the iceberg above the waterline. Perhaps he thinks there are no avant-gardes capable of translating his analysis into action? Perhaps he has given up the present historical phase as a bad job? Perhaps he thinks that the only thing left today is to testify *for* revolution *against* the Communist parties, seeing that now it is possible to do this without identifying with the right, but also without any hope of breakthrough and of leftward hegemony?

The second element of continuity is of a theoretical nature. Sartre's "ultra-Bolshevism" in 'The Communists and Peace' is in fact the key which enabled him to accept the Communist party and the USSR, but also enables him to leave them. His stress on subjective will and the "leadership" aspect enabled him to nail down Lefort in the fifties to the factuality of "the class does not exist outside its political expression", and equally to nail down the Communists today with "you are not the political expression of the class: it is this group or that". The rightness of a political direction, of the subject, in fact, has only to measure itself against itself. This is where emerges what seems to us to be the abiding limitation of Sartre's thought, his purely subjective reading of Marx, his purely *political* reading of class struggle. Paradoxically, the root of his present pessimism, of his reduction of confrontation to speaking out by the avant-garde, lies in what Sartre still shares with the Communist parties: the lure of Leninist voluntarism, with its inevitable corollary of opportunism or recriminations of betrayal by the leadership groups.

But this is not all that there is to the Sartre of today. Certainly, this is the reef on which his political activity has stranded itself; bringing to an end his mediation on the class movement of the last half-century, with a completely fresh start in cultivating an embryo of a totally refashioned politics, *ex novo*, Sartre never ventured along the road of reflection on the outcome of the October Revolution, going right back to Leninism to pick out not only the thread of "necessity", so keenly traced in *Stalin's Ghost*, but also the thread of "possibilities"—that is, a different model of growth, the transcending of the subjectivist and at the same time evolutionist phase of Leninism (subjectivist in politics, evolutionist in accepting the model of the industrial revolution), the refining of the dialectic of destroying and levelling in Marx: in a word the perspectives not purely in ideology but in practice opened up by Marxism. Perhaps his diffidence towards the Chinese Cultural Revolution got in the way. Certainly, to rule out this enquiry, and with it a new sort of totalization, a retrieval and destruction of the experience of the Communist movement, a retrieval of

the present historical stage of class-consciousness and probably of a new way of conceiving of revolution, leaves him no other way out but the immediacy of militancy, seen essentially as a process of the social base which needs to be rebuilt from below, without historical landmarks except what little—the world being vast but unified—is strictly indispensable. The philosophy, in a word, which has given birth to a newspaper like "Liberation".

How far Sartre identifies with this militancy, which he has chosen, is hard to tell. The identification seems complete at the level of living, of personal commitment. But it is marked by an acute awareness of the ~~limitations~~ of symbolic activity, which is substantially what it amounts to. In this sense, bearing witness has to be felt as a sort of failure. But was not the association with the Communists also a failure? Sartre had tried to force on them the values of which he saw them as the bearers in spite of themselves—and he passed over all their tactical manoeuvres, vulgarities, schematisms, misgivings and immorality. But his voice probably came too late, and was too solitary to have an effective impact. No one in the sixties succeeded in stemming the crisis of the Communist movement. This crisis was malignant from birth, a sort of fever, a decomposition and reconstitution of the organism which made it more sluggish each time, leaving it the strength of the "socialist" countries, and, in addition, of the inextinguishable, rich, complex, ambiguous, seeding of the International. The only people who have resisted this crisis are those in the mass movement at a new level—where it exists—which runs into contradiction with the very matrix out of which it arose. To play a vital role in the crisis, in the sense of realizing positive mass elements from the coils of the crisis—that is difficult even for a large group: it must have been all the harder for an intellectual, like Sartre. One cannot be a Communist on one's own, he once had occasion to write.

It is difficult to work within the Communist orbit, and difficult to work outside it. For outside it, in his association with the "mass", he resumes a position which is, in a way, extraneous even to the group which he accepts and respects as an interlocutor. This is manifest in his relations with the "Cause du Peuple" and "Liberation", who seek out Sartre but never manage to count him as one of themselves; and who, in their turn—his conversations with Pierre and Philippe Gavi, to which we have often referred, reveal this on every page—are bound to appear to him as valuable elements, but certainly not to be accepted without reservation. These new avant-gardes must seem to him dangerously inclined to repeat old Communist patterns of which they are unaware and which they therefore innocently retrace—such as paternalism towards the masses, the recurrent temptation to form Popular Front alliances, superficiality with regard to history and analysis, a strong vein of populism of pre-Leninist vintage, the self-contradictory need for leadership. But as he forgave the Communists

their alien tactical behaviour, he forgives the extremely schematic style of these groups. He recognized in the Communists a value which resided beyond their contingent behaviour, in the historical process which they propelled. He recognizes in the avant-gardes of today the blueprint of a new relationship between politics and morality, a new wholeness of political experience, a refusal to be integrated, which seem to him to be the only sheet-anchor to which the battered vessel of revolution can be secured.

A revolution, of course, which is not for today. Today Sartre believes above all that the road is long and that there is an extremely high price to **gay**. This includes (as it always does anyway) the price of silence, of analyses not carried out to the bitter end. One of his last political statements *Election piège à cons*, is a glaring example of an argument deliberately taken only half way—the other half having been largely written before—for the sake of an operative choice, the over-riding need not to delude the masses in **1972** with the mirage of the ballot-paper. Would he have written the same thing if he thought there was a chance of an electoral victory for the Popular Front in France in **1972**? In that case, wouldn't he have shifted his position over whether to vote or to abstain in parliamentary elections in accordance with his predictions as to the political shifts which a Popular Front was bound, willy-nilly, to cause, so that, as happened in Chile, the political avant-gardes would have quite new possibilities of contacts with the as yet still **submerged** portion of the iceberg, that is with the class in its totality?

It is hard to say. Today, Sartre's **total** discourse takes place at one level alone—the level of his intellectual activity. And this is **the last** contradiction in which he was involved—not a contradiction in himself, but in the political destiny of a "Communist on one's own". For this occurs just in that phase of his life when he has completely burnt out that myth of the **intellectual** on which he lived, at first happily, and later with guilty feelings. Happily until the war, with a bad conscience after it, but always assured of his role, even if this role took on more markedly year by year the character of a duty, a debt to be redeemed. He was to be reminded by the **1968** events that the role might be a fiction (and the duty correspondingly less), and it seemed so strange to him that he found it hard to understand. He confessed as much himself not in **1968**, but a year later, going over it again in Italy, when he finally understood the historic guilt, the original flaw of the intellectual, who is a product of division, of symbol, of privilege, marked with the red-hot brand of capital.

He understood, but without ever fully accepting them, the theses of **1968** about culture, Rightly so, for the only history we live through is the history marked with the red-hot brand of capital. The mark is on all of us, and no one can get rid of it, without **slipping** into aphasia, into the silence of thought and **even** of action, other than the most rudimentary and blind.

But this nails him down to a second level of contradiction: not only between political action and intellectual work, but between the intellectual's objective condition and his subjective rejection of that condition. "I cannot be any different: I am an intellectual, a bourgeois, an old man." If his young friends, to whom this remark is frequently addressed, understand its meaning as a lucid recognition of his own situation and not at all as a confession of guilt, seeing that no one is free from the original sin of having come out of a bourgeois society, then the political work that Sartre is carrying out with them will have left its most important sediment.

It is, in fact—if we can provisionally attach a conclusion to this rough exploratory sketch—a lesson in revolutionary political morality. It is the ~~only~~ lesson that an intellectual in the state of separateness, and over the years which Sartre lived through, had any chance of testing and passing on. Any other choice would have slid back into opportunism: either the opportunism of those who, under one alibi or another, relinquished direct links, however desperate, with the working-class movement; or that of those who felt absolved from the obligation to think and re-think because they had joined the Communist party. Sartre teaches us not to be content; his intransigence expresses itself in the ever unappeased need to verify time after time where and what the battlefield of class is, and to take his place there, at once in freedom and in solidarity. In rejecting delegation of responsibility and the accompanying discipline, but in looking for a side to take, in understanding the needs and duties of the situation. In rejecting opportunist tactics, but in striving for unity. In understanding political activity, in other words, as a permanent self-questioning, being able to start all over again from the beginning and reforge one's commitment at every step without residue. It is difficult to separate his impasses and his failures from those of the entire revolutionary left over the last forty years; the hopes and defeats of revolution in the West found in him, as in few others, not a witness or a historian, but a singular point of precipitation. They became, in him, a life that tempestuously preceded and reflected them.

*Translated by John Gatt-Rutter*

#### NOTES

1. See among others the lively though not impeccable *Sartre e il marxism* by P. Chiodi, recently reissued by Feltrinelli.
2. See "Réponse à Albert Camus", in *Les Temps Modernes*, August 1952, reprinted in *Situations IV*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.
3. Raymond Aron, *Histoire et dialectique de la violence*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973.
4. In the conversation with the "Maos", published by Gallimard, he says straightforwardly "I will never agree to you, as an organization, criticizing my Flaubert". For "I've been working on it for years with techniques and methods which I've med to alter. I don't think all this can be discussed all over again

at a mass level. One day there will be a new culture, belonging to everybody, and everybody will be both a manual and an intellectual worker. That will be the day when people will read my Flaubert and say 'old hat', or 'there are some interesting things in it'. But this cannot happen yet today". Although "I consider this to be a socialist work, inasmuch as, if I succeed, it should enable us to take a step forward in understanding people through a socialist perspective."

5. Paris, Maspero, 1973.
6. See the conversation, which has already been quoted, with his friends of "Libération", where he says: "It was in Italy, a few days before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, that the students of Bologna asked me the significance of the May events, and that I started to reflect about them.. . It took me the whole of 1969. To understand what happened in May involves calling into question ourselves, the intellectuals."
7. See "Réponse à Camus".
8. This is something that every Communist party has gone through, from the "hard-liners" such as the PCF is reputed to be, to the "soft-liners" like the Italian Communist party, which has had more than one brush with its fraternal party on this score; but—except possibly during the very last years of Togliatti's life, during which the old leader seemed to divine the need for a different relationship—they were clashes which really betrayed irritability, as well as a certain rivalry between the two largest European parties, more than a genuine difference of direction.  
On this point see also Sartre's views, from his *Critique* to the more directly political aspects touched on in the interview on *Partito e classe (Party and Class)* which he gave to the monthly "Manifesto", 5, 1970; reprinted in the *Socialist Register*, 1970.
10. See F. Fé, *Sartre e il Comunismo*, *La Nuova Italia*, Florence, 1970, which is factually very accurate. As regards interpretation, from the theoretical and political point of view, my opinion is obviously rather different.
11. See *Sartre et l'ultrabolchvisme*, in *Les aventures de la dialectique*.
12. This is to my mind the real key to the relationship between the European left and the USSR. See *The Socialist Register* 1974.
13. See *Stalin's Ghost*.
14. See the pages on the inevitability of de-Stalinization (pp. 258 and following) in the reprint issued in *Situations VZI*, 1965.
14. See the pages on the inevitability of de-Stalinization (pp. 258 and following) in the reprint issued in *Situations VII*, 1965.  
See "Sartre on Violence", in *New Statesman* 25 June 1960, with regard to the young "insoumis" who rejected the Algerian war.